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Corruption: The Achilles' Heel of Afghanistan

Jarad Van Wagoner

Introduction

Recently, in Afghanistan's deep south, a senior Taliban commander has yet again eluded the Afghan government, U.S. and coalition forces. This was done not through force of arms, superior knowledge of the terrain, or foreign assistance, but through corruption. For a measly US \$15,000, an Afghan National Security Directorate official gave the commander his freedom and the ability to strike at Afghan government and coalition forces yet again. Sadly, this marked the third occasion this commander had bribed his way around justice.¹

Despite the successful removal of the Taliban in 2001, followed by democratic elections in 2004, the government of Afghanistan continues to fight for legitimacy. Since 2003 the Taliban and other anti-government groups have managed to stage an effective insurgency against both the Afghan government and their international partners.² As the security situation has deteriorated across the southern and eastern portions of the country, the legitimacy of the government has become increasingly dubious. Counterinsurgent operations conducted jointly by Afghan and ISAF/US forces have struggled to restore security and shore up popular support for the government. These important legitimizing efforts, however, are rendered near useless in the face of rampant corruption throughout the body politic of Afghanistan.

¹ Alastair Leithead, "Bribes' free top Taleban leader," *BBC News*, January 8, 2008. at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7176807.stm, accessed on January 8, 2008.

² Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

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Corruption in Afghanistan has reached a level that threatens to offset any gains in other, more traditional, counterinsurgency operations. According to Transparency International's *2007 Corruption Perceptions Index*, Afghanistan scored a dismal 1.8 out of 10 in terms of honesty in government, ranking 172 out of 180 countries. Corruption runs rampant from the highest levels of government to the lowliest foot soldier in the Afghan National Police. Following a public and international outcry, President Hamid Karzai, in an attempt to regain some moral authority, publicly acknowledged that corruption has slowed reconstruction efforts.³ During a meeting with local leaders, one elderly Afghan told Karzai,

"The government and cabinet members are sucking the blood of innocent people, we can't tolerate the corruption in every government office."⁴

Persistent, unbridled corruption will continue to drain whatever legitimacy the government has or may obtain. Corruption forces people to pay more for merely living in the country, it funds insurgents and lawless warlords through the opium and weapons trades, it weakens the economy and it lowers the overall quality of life for the overwhelming majority of the population. The fight against corruption must be an integral component of any counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan. Failure to bring corruption under control will further weaken an already struggling central government in Kabul.

This paper will attempt to describe the corruption as it is occurring in Afghanistan and the adverse consequences such corruption has on reconstruction and development. The first section will explore briefly the theoretical underpinnings of the causes and consequences of corruption. Next, it will examine specific and general instances of corruption in Afghanistan. In the

³ Ron Synovitz, "Afghanistan: Karzai's Corruption Comments Could Lead to Cabinet Shakeup," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 16, 2007, at <http://www.rferl.org>, accessed on 30 November 2007.

⁴ Hamid Shalizi, "Corruption Rife in Afghanistan: President," *Reuters*, November 13, 2007, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSISL21150920071113>, accessed on 30 November 2007.

concluding section it will point to specific consequences of corruption in Afghanistan.

Corruption and Theory

Causes

In the vast majority of cases, “corruption is a crime of calculation, not passion.”⁵ Those who engage in corruption weigh the risks and benefits of doing so. If the reward is high enough to outweigh the risks, it is likely that corruption will take place.⁶ Bryan Husted suggested a number of hypotheses regarding causes and contributing factors linked to corruption. Three stand out for the case at hand. First, the further the population is removed from the political power center, the greater the potential for high levels of corruption. Government officials free from the oversight of an active civil society are more likely to engage in acts of corruption. Second, societies which face a significant degree of uncertainty regarding their future security and well-being are more likely to engage in corruption in order to provide at least a degree of certainty.⁷ Third, Husted suggests that a masculine culture, which is more focused on material success, will experience higher levels of corruption. Ineffective and weak governments, which are associated with the first two hypotheses, contribute to corruption as people and officials resort to bribery to determine who receives the limited attention and resources of the state.⁸ It is also important to note “petty

⁵ Robert Klitgaard, “International Cooperation on Combating Corruption,” *New Perspectives on Combating Corruption*, (Washington, DC: Transparency International and the World Bank, 2007): 46.

⁶ Omar Azfar, Young Lee, and Anand Swamy, “The Causes and Consequences of Corruption,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 753, Culture and Development: International Perspectives (January 2001): 51.

⁷ Bryan W. Husted, “Wealth, Culture, and Corruption,” *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2nd Quarter, 1999): 343-354.

⁸ Mitchell A. Seligson, “The Impact of Corruption on Regime Legitimacy: A Comparative Study of Four Latin American Countries,” *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (May 2002): 413.

corruption...is linked to higher level systematic and systemic forms of corruption.”⁹

As the *Afghanistan Human Development Report 2007* points out, “post-conflict countries are particularly vulnerable to corruption because of weak government institutions and the inability to ensure the rule of law.”¹⁰ Based on the proposed causes of corruption above, it is understandable why Afghanistan has proven such a fertile breeding ground for corruption. The overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, after decades of war, did not lead to an era of stability or development. Rather, it has given way to another round of insurgency warfare aimed at disrupting all attempts to restore order. For most Afghans, the future remains extremely uncertain. Additionally, over three decades of war have upset traditional political structures. Village elders and the role of the *shura* have been replaced, or reduced in their effectiveness, by local warlords and militant Islamists, i.e. the Taliban.¹¹ At the same time, the new democratic political structure, at the local and national level, seems removed from the concerns of the average citizen. Despite the elections of 2004, civil society in Afghanistan largely remains the province of the elite, with the general population distant from the center of political power. The current government remains weak and ineffective, forcing citizens and officials to work out their own unofficial methods for the delivery of services. Finally, the Afghan culture is heavily patriarchal, with notions of honor in part determined by status relative to peers.¹² This in turn encourages cutting corners and the disregard of processes in favor of end results.

⁹ Stephen P. Riley, “Petty Corruption and Development,” *Development in Practice*, Vol. 9, No. ½ (February 1999): 190.

¹⁰ Center for Policy and Human Development, *Afghanistan Human Development Report 2007*, (Islamabad: Army Press, 2007): 61.

¹¹ Thomas H. Johnson, “Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border,” a paper prepared for delivery at the Conference on Ungoverned Spaces, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, August 2-3, 2007: 34-35.

¹² Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 181. The Pashtun code of honor, or *Pashtunwali*, in many ways wrapped up in a man’s obligation to protect his “gold, his women and his property—*Zar, Zan and Zamin*.” See Johnson, 22.

Consequences

Corruption, especially when open and widespread, can have a deleterious impact on a state's economy, the population's quality of life, the rule of law, and in the end call into question the legitimacy of the government. In terms of economics, studies have indicated that corruption "reduces investment and slows growth."¹³ Corruption can force businesses underground, which in turn reduces tax revenues, thus, further reducing the ability of the government to operate effectively. Bribes also can have the same effect as officials distribute state resources without proper collection of fees for services. Investment will fall as business plans and cash flows are impacted by the cost of payouts and bribes. As Mitchell Seligson suggests, "when corruption increases by two points on a ten-point scale, GDP decreases by 0.5% and investment decreases by 4%."¹⁴

Corruption often hits the low-income portion of society the hardest "when measured by the bribes/income ratio."¹⁵ Where corruption is rampant, its greatest effect is felt at the juncture where citizens interact with government officials – the arena of public services and health. The poor are forced to pay more with less while dealing with a government that does not meet the needs of everyone. Individuals and families are forced to choose between competing necessities with very limited resources. Often health and nutritional needs are inadequately met, as people are forced make concessions just to make a living. This, in turn, will result in increased health, education, and employment problems that overwhelm already weak government institutions. The cycle, once begun, becomes increasingly difficult to break. As Stephen Riley points out, corruption "reinforces the current unequal distribution of opportunities and undermines basic human rights."¹⁶

¹³ Seligson, 409-410.

¹⁴ Seligson, 409-412. Seligson also details the effects of bribes on a society. See also Azfar, Lee and Swamy, 46.

¹⁵ Azfar, Lee and Swamy, 48.

¹⁶ Riley, 190.

As corruption spreads the rule of law breaks down. Rule of law is tied directly to economic performance, state capability and government legitimacy. Rule-of-law guarantees personal freedoms and rights. Corruption breaks down the responsibility and accountability of the government in ensuring these rights. Without responsibility and accountability the state begins to exist not to meet the needs of the entire population, but to provide opportunities for the elite and government officials.¹⁷ Populations faced with the consequences of corruption are apt to lose their faith in their government officials, if not in the very system of government. Falling public confidence in government exacerbates the problem as the population is forced to act as “clients and bribers who look for private protection to gain access to decision-makers.”¹⁸ The loss of legitimacy, ultimately, can bring the state to a halt or lead to worse consequences. Seligson writes that:

“In order for political systems to function reasonably well, actions taken by leaders need to be viewed as legitimate. If not, the ‘degrees of freedom’ with which decision makers have to operate are reduced considerably. Immobilism is a potential outcome of political systems in which the mass public does not believe in the legitimacy of the system.”¹⁹

Even worse than the “immobilism” mentioned by Seligson is the potential downfall of a government or the state. Such a scenario is particularly true for a state like Afghanistan.

Corruption: A National Cancer

Afghanistan’s corruption has taken on epidemic proportions, and infects everyday life to a tragic degree. Government positions are often sold to the highest bidder. Warlords and drug barons work closely with bureaucrats and police at all levels. Even Afghanistan’s international partners who are engaged in military, reconstruction and humanitarian operations are unable to escape the

¹⁷ Center for Policy and Human Development, 39.

¹⁸ Seligson, 413.

¹⁹ Seligson, 429.

stain of corruption. It is important to reiterate the current state of affairs in Afghanistan. The government and its international partners are involved in counterinsurgency efforts against a determined foe. Every action of the Taliban and other insurgents is aimed at discrediting and de-legitimizing the Afghan government.²⁰ The effects of corruption on public perception of the government must be considered in this light. A 2005 survey of the Afghan people indicated “76% of people perceive corruption as high in the judiciary, and 71% perceive it as frequent in the administrative services.”²¹ The same survey suggested that nearly half of Afghan households had paid on average US \$100 in bribes, which is significant when the average GDP per capita is around US \$960.²²

Corruption occurs not only at the level of the lowly bureaucrat but also at the highest levels of government. In a recent report, distinguished war correspondent Anthony Loyd highlights the fact that several police officers have named “General Azzam, recently appointed Chief of Operations after his stint as Chief of Staff, and his deputy General Reshad as the prime recipients of bribes.”²³ The same report hints at rumors by senior government officials that President Karzai’s brother Wali, “head of Kandahar’s provincial council...[has] a key role in orchestrating the movement of heroin from Kandahar eastward through Helmand and out across the Iranian border.”²⁴ While not all accusations of corruption aimed at government officials are based on hard evidence, both the public and bureaucrats suspect everyone of being involved.

In Afghanistan opium is king. Current estimates put the revenue from the opium trade at somewhere near *half* of the country’s GDP.²⁵ The dollar figures

²⁰ *The U.S. Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007): 2.

²¹ Center for Policy and Human Development, 61.

²² Center for Policy and Human Development, 61.

²³ Anthony Loyd, “Corruption, Bribes and Trafficking: A Cancer That is Engulfing Afghanistan,” *TimesOnline*, November 24, 2007), at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/>, accessed on 30 November 2007.

²⁴ Loyd.

²⁵ Ahmad Masood, “Portfolio,” *Reuters*, May 6, 2006, at http://photos.reuters.com/Pictures/galleries/showcases/showcase_slide.asp?storyID=632996269337031250

involved are staggering when considering the state of the general economy and the income of the average Afghan family. Already approximately 14.3% of the Afghan people are involved in the opium trade, and in some provinces up to 80% of all families derive income from the crop.²⁶ It has become common practice for government positions especially along prime drug smuggling routes to be sold for large sums of money.²⁷ One general was appointed chief of police in an important drug smuggling province after he paid the asking price of one hundred fifty thousand in hard currency. Unfortunately for the general, he misunderstood the details of the interaction and paid in afghanis rather than with the expected US dollars. He was promptly thrown out of office. Some within the Afghan government have rated the country's provinces according to the profitability of official positions in connection with the drug trade. Police positions in a top-rated province can cost upwards of US \$300,000. As Anthony Loyd reports, the return on investment can be significant with some estimates indicating that some "counter-narcotic officials...take home \$400,000 a month from heroin smuggling."²⁸ Also, in November 2007, 10 high-ranking counter-narcotics officials within the Ministry of Interior were detained "for misappropriating three million afghanis and US \$47,000."²⁹ The Center for Policy and Human Development did not overstate the situation when they

[&urlStr=/pictures/&directory=/configData/Pictures/&edition=US](#), accessed November 14, 2006, "Poppy profits fuel Taliban," CNN, May 22, 2007, at <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/05/21/afghan.drugs.ap/index.html>, accessed June 1, 2007, and Priya Abraham, "Where Poppies Grow," World Magazine, 12 May 2007, at <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/12924>, accessed May 7, 2007.

²⁶ *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2007*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, September 2006, www.unodc.org/pdf/execsummaryafg.pdf (accessed September 1, 2007).

²⁷ Azfar, Lee and Swamy write that "an indication that corruption has become endemic is when government jobs begin to be sold. The price of the job then depends on its remuneration, including bribes." See Azfar, Lee and Swamy, 48.

²⁸ Loyd.

²⁹ *Pajhwok Afghan News*, "10 Police Officers Detained on Embezzlement Charges," (November 26, 2007), at <http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com>, accessed on 4 December 2007.

wrote, “the opium economy is a source of corruption and undercuts public institutions, particularly those in the security and justice sectors.”³⁰

Corruption among local police often has a direct impact on the population. As another work produced by the Program for Culture and Conflict Studies states:

“Equal enforcement of the law is not occurring where the police meet the population. Bribes and extortion are demanded from the public, at checkpoints and traffic stops for missing documents or as ‘taxes.’ Taxi drivers are often forced to pay traffic police in Kabul between \$0.20 and \$6 each day. A recent survey suggests that the average Afghan household pays an average of \$100 annually in bribes. With a per capita GDP of only approximately \$300, bribes are especially harmful to the Afghan population. Police are also known to be involved in crimes at the local level, occasionally engaging in brutal and violent treatment of the population.”³¹

Afghanistan’s warlords also contribute significantly to the level of corruption across the country. Three decades of war and the decline of traditional Afghan culture contributed to the rise of the warlords. From the period of the Soviet invasion through the rise of the Taliban to the present, many of today’s warlords have funded their militias and ventures with the help of outside sources, criminal activity and on the backs of local populations. The result was the creation of competing powerbases and significant roadblocks to the formation of a strong central government. While many of the current generation of warlords were temporarily co-opted or sidelined by the rise of the Taliban, they have returned with a vengeance. As a new government was formed following the US sponsored routing of the Taliban, Hamid Karzai was encouraged by Zalmay Khalilzad “to ‘co-opt’ the warlords in pursuit of ‘peace,’ ignoring justice.”³² Consequently, the very warlords who prevented the creation of an effective government following the withdrawal of Soviet troops were

³⁰ Center for Policy and Human Development, 60.

³¹ Program for Culture and Conflict Studies, *Afghan National Police: Appendix*, at <http://www.nps.edu/programs/ccs/>, accessed on 30 December 2007.

³² Somali Kolhatkar and James Ingalls, *Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, Warlords, and the Propaganda of Silence*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006): 161.

invited to openly participate in the political process. The human rights violations and crimes committed by these warlords continue to mitigate many of the government and coalition good works.³³

Since the formation of the interim government several of Afghanistan's worst warlords have served as governors, parliamentarians, cabinet members, and military leaders. In large part they have brought their past professions with them into government service. Intimidation of the population continued beginning with the elections as people were informed by warlords' organizations the necessity of voting properly.³⁴ There are strong indications that suggest some of these former warlords, now officials of the Afghan government are directly involved in the opium trade.³⁵ Additionally, evidence and rumors suggest that US and British forces have made secret payments to warlords in order to secure their loyalty to the current government.³⁶ In her book, *The Punishment of Virtue*, Sarah Chayes details many of Gul Agha Sherzai's most egregious acts of corruption in his official capacity as governor of both Kandahar and Nangarhar provinces and as a cabinet minister. Sherzai is a class act, who as governor of Kandahar withheld customs revenues from the central government and was then rewarded with a position in Karzai's cabinet. While in Kandahar he withheld funds sent by the central government, which were intended as wages for the Afghan National Police.³⁷ Ismail Khan also was accused of withholding over \$100 million in customs while he was governor of Herat. Illegal land appropriation from the poor has also become common among former

³³ Graeme Smith, "From Canadian custody into cruel hands," *Globe and Mail*, April 23, 2007, at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20070423.wdetainee23/BNStory/Afghanistan/home/?pageRequested=1>, accessed on January 8, 2008.

³⁴ Kolhatkar and Ingalls, 150.

³⁵ Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2006): 163 and 273. See also Kolhatkar and Ingalls, 108-112.

³⁶ Kevin Savage, Lorenzo Delesgues, Ellen Martin, and Gul Pacha Ulfat, "Corruption, Perceptions and Risks in Humanitarian Assistance: An Afghanistan Case Study," *Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper*, July 2007, at <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/papers/WPcorruptionafghanistan.pdf>, accessed on December 5, 2007.

³⁷ Chayes, 182-183 and 313

warlords turned government officials. Local warlords frequently work as contractors for reconstruction efforts, often keeping large sums of money for their own purposes.³⁸

Regrettably, the continued influence of the warlords is linked not only to the Afghan government but also to the United States and other partner nations. Over the past six years, the Afghan population has watched with difficulty as the authority of the warlords has been legitimized. These are the same warlords whose gross disregard for their fellow Afghans made the Taliban initially acceptable to a significant portion of the population. Common sense suggests that any serious counterinsurgent efforts to legitimize the government are reduced in effectiveness by the inclusion of former warlords, many of who remain wanton criminals, in the new government structure. The legitimacy of both the Afghan government and its international partners suffers due to their willing association with these warlords.

It is important to highlight the fact that the stain of corruption is not limited to the fabric of the Afghan government. The perception of corruption also casts its shadow on international aid organizations and the foreign military forces, which comprise NATO and other allied partners in the country. Post-conflict countries often are susceptible to corruption due to pressure to spend aid dollars quickly, limited state capacity to enforce the law and a lack of security. Construction work and contracting, where promises and cash are quickly exchanged with little to no oversight, are especially predisposed to corruption.³⁹ As indicated above foreign militaries, to include those of the United States and Canada, cooperate directly with warlords on issues of security and contracting

³⁸ Mike Blanchfield and Andrew Mayeda, "Defense Department Conceals Afghan Business Deals," *CanWest News Service*, (November 19, 2007), at <http://www.canada.com/topics/news/story.html?id=1cd49a86-b77b-40b3-9190-2f9d36b79d7b&k=97275>, accessed on November 30, 2007.

³⁹ Kevin Savage, Lorenzo Delesgues, Ellen Martin, and Gul Pacha Ulfat, "Corruption, Perceptions and Risks in Humanitarian Assistance: An Afghanistan Case Study," *Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper*, July 2007, at <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg>, accessed on December 5, 2007. According to the authors

for various services. Journalists Mike Blanchfield and Andrew Mayeda point to the unwillingness of the Canadian forces to disclose the names of all the indigenous companies with which they do business in Afghanistan. Their investigations revealed, “at least 29 contracts, totaling \$1.14 million, went to a corporate entity known as ‘Sherzai,’ raising the question of whether the contracts were awarded to Gul Agha Sherzai,” a provincial governor.⁴⁰ At the same time private security companies, most often employed by foreign nations or the Afghan government, have come under fire in Afghanistan for their illegal practices. A number of these firms have been linked with crimes ranging from bank robbery to drug smuggling and everything in between. It is assumed by many that warlords have transformed their militias into private security firms in order to maintain their private armies.⁴¹ Reconstruction efforts and humanitarian aid is also tainted. Recent estimates indicate that local Afghan leaders steal roughly half of all aid money is used for purposes other than what it was intended for. One source within the Pentagon reportedly suggests that Afghan “police officers had stolen and sold at least half of the equipment supplied by the US, including thousands of cars and trucks.”⁴² Blame for corruption in the reconstruction process and the distribution of aid is cast at “local officials, commanders and non-governmental organizations.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Blanchfield and Mayeda.

⁴¹ Susanne Schmeidl and Lisa Rimli, “Private Security Companies and Local Populations: An Exploratory Study of Afghanistan and Angola,” *Swisspeace*, (November 2007), at http://www.swisspeace.ch/typo3/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Executive_Summary_PSC_and_local_populations.pdf, accessed on December 4, 2007. See also Aunohita Mojumdar, “Nobody Guarding Afghanistan’s Guards,” *Asia Times Online*, November 21, 2007, at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/IK21Df01.html, accessed on November 30, 2007.

⁴² Gethin Chamberlain, “US Military: Afghan Leaders Steal Half of All Aid,” *The Sunday Telegraph*, January 28, 2007, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/01/28/wafg28.xml>, accessed January 8, 2008.

⁴³ “Afghanistan: Some Aid Vulnerable to Mismanagement, Corruption, Say Experts,” *IRIN*, October 4, 2007, at <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=74635>, accessed January 9, 2008.

Conclusion

Stories of corruption and those involved, unfortunately, could fill volumes. In understanding the current plague, two major points assert themselves. First, corruption in Afghanistan may well lose the war for the Afghan government, the United States and the other partner nations. As David Rohde states in *The New York Times*:

“Some current and former American and Afghans officials warn that corruption, drug trafficking and the rising lawlessness pose graver threats to the government than even the Taliban.”⁴⁴

If corruption remains unchecked by the Afghan government, or its international partners, legitimacy in the eyes of the population may never be obtained. How can the current government be considered acceptable when it so openly contradicts what it says? As long as law and order remain separate from reality, it is unlikely the Afghan people will respect either the system of government or the people within it. Second, it is important to understand the malignant nature of corruption when it is allowed to run unchecked. Corruption has a spiral effect of worsening the situation in an already tenuous situation. It decreases economic opportunities and increases uncertainty for the bulk of the population. Chris Alexander, a special representative of the United Nations in Kabul stated, “Corruption is the No. 1 obstacle to peace and economic prosperity in Afghanistan.”⁴⁵

Today the future of Afghanistan remains uncertain. Despite significant progress in the creation of a democratically elected government, ultimate success

⁴⁴ David Rohde, “Overhaul of Afghan Police is New Priority,” *The New York Times*, October 18, 2007, at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/18/world/asia/18afghan.html?_r=1&oref=slogin, accessed January 9, 2008.

⁴⁵ “Battle Against Corruption Second Front in Afghanistan,” *Ottawa Citizen*, July 21, 2007, at http://www.canadaka.net/news/23155-Battle_against_corruption_second_front_in_Afghanistan, accessed January 9, 2008.

is distant. The fight against corruption must become a primary focus of counterinsurgency efforts. Success depends on public support and participation in government. Corruption, however, removes any sense of public ownership or civic responsibility in government. While solutions will require significant and painful changes, maintaining the status quo may very well result in defeat.

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